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YOU GO TO MY HEAD

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in

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DEDICATION

This is for Kay and all the other difficult women in the arts.

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I would like to thank Professor Robyn Hunt for her assistance in developing this project, Professor Steven Pearson for helping it come to life onstage, and Theatre Nohgaku and the Kita School of Noh for breathing inspiration into this work, time and time again.

ABSTRACT

You Go to My Head follows forgotten Hollywood actress Kay Francis as she comes to terms with the realization her fiancé is a Nazi spy. Over the course of the show, Kay seeks advice from Bette Davis, Hedy Lamarr and Marlene Dietrich. Stylistically, this solo performance was inspired by pre-code Hollywood films as well as traditional Japanese theatre styles, specifically Noh. The piece explores the role of women in a patriarchal society, sexual fluidity, and the relationship between art and practicality.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The following play, *You Go to My Head*, was developed over the course of my graduate career at the University of South Carolina. Upon entering the program, I knew I would be tasked with creating a solo performance piece. As a result, I kept detailed notes on bits of inspiration I found in the wild. Initially, I assumed I would create an autobiographical piece. Writing about what I knew firsthand seemed like the best way to generate something successful. However, I made my life all the more difficult when I was inspired along the way by other works of drama and media.

Japanese Noh theatre ignited the first spark of inspiration for this piece. I spent two summers in Tokyo, training with Theatre Nohgaku and the Kita School of Noh. Noh performance differs greatly from its Western counterparts. It is slow moving and methodical. It shows just a moment in time, a brief encounter between two or more wandering souls. The characters converse and depart. There is often no clear resolution.

Many Noh plays focus on women. Much of the Western canon centers on male characters. In my acting career, I have become accustomed to playing side or supporting roles as a woman. Many female characters in the Western canon are used as a plot device, asked to look pretty or cry without internal motivations. Therefore, I was deeply

surprised and moved to see female characters in Noh handled with such respect and nuance.

My time in Japan also led me to reflect on my experience as an American. Thrown into an international community, I felt somehow responsible for the transgressions of my homeland. I was embarrassed when politics were mentioned and tried to distance myself from the image of the ignorant cowboy. Yet I felt homesick much of the time. I longed for the America I know and wanted to show that core through this piece.

What is more American than Hollywood? The glamour and bombast of the Golden Age of Hollywood are distinctive and identifiable around the world. A lover of early cinema, I regularly listen to the podcast, *You Must Remember This*. The weekly program gives brief histories on the star system and scandals of Hollywood's early days. It was through this podcast that I first heard about Kay Francis.

Kay Francis is the most successful Hollywood actress you have never heard of. She was a comedic star of pre-code cinema, acting in banter-filled romantic comedies with the likes of William Powell and Herbert Marshall. Signed under Warner Brothers, she was often underutilized. The studio did not quite know what to do with her. Though she was a quick wit, Kay was often placed in morality films. A vibrant member of the party scene in Hollywood, she just did not fit into the ingenue roles prescribed to her.

In 1938, she was declared "box office poison", along with a number of other famous actors and actresses, by an advertisement in the Hollywood Reporter. The advertisement was paid for by the Independent Theatre Owners of America, who were

losing money on the over-priced films of the time. The advertisement denounced Kay and praised her eventual successor as top-billed star at Warner Brothers, Bette Davis. The advertisement marked the beginning of the end for Kay's career. Kay quietly finished out her contract at Warner Brothers before moving to films produced by Poverty Row studios and then eventually returning to the stage on Broadway.

I was intrigued by Kay. After I heard a brief history of her career on *You Must Remember This*, I did an extensive internet search. There was not a lot to discover. There is limited information about her. Unlike her contemporaries Bette Davis and Marlene Dietrich, she does not have an extensive photo catalogue. The photos I did find captured her wry smile. She was always fashionably dressed, often in sequins and furs.

Much of her filmography is inaccessible to modern audiences. The films have been lost to time. Some VHS and DVD copies are available for purchase at a price. A handful, such as the critical masterpiece *Trouble in Paradise*, are available for streaming. When I finally got my hands on *Jewel Robbery*, I was hooked. She has a delightfully mischievous presence on camera. She is graceful, yet down to earth and instantly likeable. I was horrified to see her legacy forgotten. It was like I had stumbled on hidden treasure.

Throughout my screenings of her films, it became clear that she must be the subject of my thesis performance. I continued to digest her filmography and read the only credible (in my opinion) biography, *Kay Francis: A Passionate Life and Career* by John Rossman and Lynn Kear.

Through my research, I uncovered her numerous affairs, including her rumored on-again, off-again relationship with titan Marlene Dietrich and her engagement to alleged Nazi spy Baron Raven Erik Barnekow. She also had a frenemy relationship with young Bette Davis and interacted with scientist and actress Hedy Lamarr. By tying together all these impressive relationships, a narrative unfolded.

The resulting script is what I would call a contemporary American Noh. The story takes us back to a moment in time and allows four wandering souls to revisit their turmoil from beyond the grave. It gives new life and new understanding to Kay, like many Nohs do for mythic and historic female figures in Japan. I utilized the atmosphere of Noh, but inserted dialogue inspired by those quippy pre-code romantic comedies.

The narrative also speaks to our national turmoil, present then and now. In our country, there is an epidemic of white male aggression driven by fear, ignorance and insecurity. I wanted to explore how women address this aggression, what happens when they are not a supporting role in the white man's narrative. I needed to show our female tenacity- the ability to problem-solve when faced with conflict, instead of stereotypically dissolving into tears.

I wrote the script over a number of months. The initial run of the performance took place at the Center for Performance Experiment at the University of South Carolina in February 2018. A dense script with jaunty dialogue, the play was a daunting challenge for me as a solo performer.

During my time in Japan, I had seen traditional *rakugo*, a storytelling performance where one narrator simply sits onstage and acts out many roles. I aimed for this sharp

simplicity in switching between the four characters in the script- Kay Francis, Bette Davis, Hedy Lamarr and Marlene Dietrich.

I created *kata* for each role that I could switch between with ease- distinctive gestures and voices. Kay was denoted with her infamous lisp- all “r”s were pronounced as “w”s. I mimicked her definitive slouch, primarily taken from *Jewel Robbery* and *One Way Passage*. Bette Davis was captured from her drawl. I looked at her early films, such as *Jezebel*, which was contemporary to Kay’s film career, and some of her later works as well, pulling a great deal from *All About Eve*. She prowled with a cigarette in hand. Hedy moved almost like an ostrich with long-necked curiosity. Her Austrian accent came from *Algiers*, the film mentioned in the script. Marlene Dietrich’s swagger is straight out of *Der blaue Engel*, the German film that made her an international sensation. I imitated her accent from *Morocco* and *Knight Without Armor*.

The initial performance was successful and a joy to perform. However, I did need to cut much of the script to fit into our time constraint of 14-17 minutes. The final cut came in around 15 minutes. The initial “final draft” came in at about an hour.

I anticipate remounting the production in the future. I did have talks with Actors’ Shakespeare Project in Boston to perform the piece for a fundraiser, but those plans sadly fell through. I have continued to work on the script in the past year, tweaking here and there. My ultimate goal is to create something around 60 to 85 minutes in length to perform at venues around my current city, Boston.

Although this is a script for a solo performer, it does demand some technical help. Professor Steven Pearson helped me create a small, but effective set. I cannot imagine

performing the piece without those scenic elements. I do have many of the props and the costume, a deco red-sequined dress, but sadly, it would still be a challenge to remount on my own considering lights and sound. I hope to find an artistic home where I may find other artists to collaborate with to bring a second production about.

CHAPTER 2

YOU GO TO MY HEAD

(Kay Francis' Warner Brothers' dressing room. May 3, 1938. Velvet curtains, an oriental rug, a dainty chair and a Louis XIV desk topped with a rotary phone. A side table with a bottle of gin, a martini with an olive and a decadent ashtray with a cigarette.)

("So Is Your Old Lady" by Ruth Etting plays.)

(Lights up on Kay Francis in red sequins. She sits at her desk, speaking into the phone. A clipping from the Hollywood Reporter. Earrings and a fat diamond ring.)

(Kay speaks in a thick Mid-Atlantic with a lisp. Her 'r's come out as 'w's.)

KAY: Hello. I'd like to place a person to person call to Baron Raven Erik
Barnekow, Alt-Marin, Pomeria at numbers 14R2.

I'll wait.

(She waits.)

Erik, darling! ... I'm so glad I caught you... There's this advertisement. In the Hollywood Reporter. It's not an advertisement for a product or anything like that. It's a complaint about me! From the Independent Theatre Owners of America, whoever they are...

It's titled "Dead Cats".

"Wake up! Practically all of the major studios are burdened with stars receiving tremendous salaries necessitated by contractual obligations. Among those players whose dramatic ability is unquestioned, but whose box-office draw is nil, can be numbered Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Joan Crawford, Katharine Hepburn and Kay Francis... Kay Francis, still receiving many-thousands a week, is now making B pictures- poison at the box office."

I think the assumption, darling, is that I'm the dead cat. Myself along with the other ladies listed... No, I agree, it's not a great title... Erik! I'm a bit more concerned with the content rather than the title.

I know! I know. I can hardly wait for September...

So soon? ... Yes, yes of course. Tell Ernst I say hello. I have to get ready for Bette's anyway. She's invited me for dinner... Yes, Bette.

What?

Are you sure? ... What would prompt Bette to say such a thing?... No, this is the first I've heard of it.

Oh no, I intend to. I'll ask her directly.

Erik? I shouldn't be concerned, should I?

Right back at you.

(Ruffled, she hangs up the phone, rises. A cigarette and a shift.)

("There's Something in the Air" by Ruth Etting plays. We shift to the Bette Davis' Beverly Hills hacienda-style home. A party.)

(Bette Davis appears.)

BETTE: Kay! Come in! We've got shrimp cocktail in the parlor and Willy's got the bar set up on the patio... You're not upset about that article, are you?

Willy says it's nothing. They're just looking to blame somebody for those numbers.

KAY: Bette. Are you telling people that my fiance is a Nazi?

BETTE: Why don't you come in and have some shrimp?

KAY: No, Bette. I can't stay. I just want to know why you are spreading lies
about my fiance. He's already had a go of it getting citizenship. And now
they might not let him back into the country because Bette Davis is telling
people over shrimp cocktail that Erik Barnekow is a Nazi spy!

BETTE: Kay, stop. Naivete doesn't suit you. Erik is a lot of things. He's
charismatic and handsome and a fine drinking companion.

(Bette checks behind the curtain.)

He's also a top-notch German aviator. It's been awhile since you've
brought him around. He's in Europe again? Business or pleasure?

(Bette ashes her cigarette.)

Listen Kay. I wouldn't have said it if I didn't think it was true.

KAY: It isn't true. You think I wouldn't know that the man I'm marrying is
a Nazi spy?

BETTE: The trouble with you, Kay, is your inability to be difficult. You've always gone with the punches and what has it gotten you? B pictures and a Nazi boyfriend.

(Bette looks out through the curtains.)

Those go in the kitchen!

(And back.)

Oh, I'm sorry. Why don't you come in and stay awhile. You look like you could use a drink.

KAY: Oh. Alright.

(A martini.)

BETTE: I know things look bad. But you'll bounce back. You're Kay Francis.

KAY: It's a tired act, don't you think.

BETTE: I don't know. I've always liked your style. But then again, we were never competing. Until recently. I was sorry to read that article.

KAY: That's right. I'm speaking with the newly crowned queen of Warner Brothers. How does it feel?

BETTE: I don't mind.

KAY: You can have it. Take it all. I'm retiring. And barring an act of God, my retirement will be permanent. I'm through.

BETTE: You don't mean that.

KAY: I do. My contract is up in September and I shall be glad when it comes. I want to get fat. I want to do nothing. I want to sit on my back porch, in a rocker, and not even think.

BETTE: You should fight it. If I were you, I would walk right up to Jack Warner and tell him what you're worth. You deserve better. Better roles. Better stories. Better treatment. Lord knows they're paying you enough.

KAY: I could. But even then, I've no guarantee the stories I would pick would be any better. Even if they were, the only difference would be that I would be retiring in a blaze of glory instead of more or less inconspicuously- and this is the way I want it. I'll be forgotten quicker this way.

(A breath.)

BETTE: Well. It's our loss.

KAY: Hollywood will survive. It always does.

BETTE: What's your hobby gonna be?

KAY: Pardon?

BETTE: You've got to have a hobby. People without a purpose get squirrely.

KAY: I like knitting.

BETTE: Knit me a fucking sweater then... I gotta go. Vivien Leigh is here. That bitch. Seriously. Have some shrimp.

(“You're the Cream in my Coffee” by Ruth Etting plays. Kay, struck, finds her way through the crowd into the parlor, perching on the desk.)

KAY: My inability to be difficult. I can't even refuse a drink after a dispute.

(Hedy Lamarr appears over her shoulder.)

HEDY: Are you going to eat that olive?

KAY: Pardon?

HEDY: Your olive. Can I have it? If you don't want it.

KAY: Help yourself.

(Kay holds up the glass and Hedy grabs the olive gleefully.)

HEDY: Thank you. I love olives. Can't get enough of them.

KAY: You're very welcome. I don't believe we've met. I'm Kay.

HEDY: Oh I know who you are. I've seen all your pictures. I'm Hedy. Hedy Lamarr.

KAY: Nice to meet you, Hedy Lamarr. Actress or heiress?

HEDY: Excuse me?

KAY: There are only two types of women in this town. Actresses and heiresses.
Which are you?

HEDY: Neither. I'm an inventor.

KAY: An inventor? How de rigueur. What have you invented?

HEDY: Nothing successful. Not yet. But I am working on something quite promising right now. Top secret. You understand.

KAY: Of course. Have you been here long?

HEDY: In Hollywood? Not long. I've just arrived from Paris.

KAY: Les divorces?

HEDY: Yes! How can you tell?

KAY: You have an air about you. Refreshed. My best holidays have been Paris divorces.

HEDY: It's the only reason I'd ever consider the institution again. This was my first. Divorce.

KAY: The first one is the hardest in my experience.

HEDY: It's true. It was especially hard, because I had to escape. Like a princess.
We even had a castle.

KAY: No.

HEDY: Yes. We were very rich. My husband sold guns to the Fascists.

KAY: You're joking.

HEDY: No. I'm very serious. War's the best sort of business, you know.

(A breath.)

KAY: But there isn't going to be a war, you don't think. Do you?

HEDY: Of course there's going to be a war. You don't just buy guns for nothing.
They were ready then and I have no doubt they are ready now.

KAY: Ready for what?

HEDY: Reparations.
For the past twenty years, a generation of men has sat crippled in central Europe. A slighted man can do a lot of damage, as I'm sure you know.

Now imagine a whole country of slighted men. It gives one room for pause, does it not?

(A breath.)

KAY: Was your husband a Nazi, then?

HEDY: Not technically. He was Austrian, but his father was a Jew. I think they tolerated him for the business. And his pretty wife.

KAY: Did you know when you married him?

HEDY: I did. But I didn't realize fully, if that makes sense. He was very handsome. And rich. There were better things to focus on and I chose not to question the rest.

But then I did realize.

(A breath.)

KAY: And now you're in Hollywood.

HEDY: Now I am in Hollywood.

KAY: And you're an inventor!

HEDY: And I'm inventor... I should tell you that in addition to being an inventor, I also have a picture contract with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

KAY: I knew it. Have they put you in anything yet?

HEDY: *Algiers*. It's a bad American remake of a good French film.

KAY: Of course.

HEDY: Shame about that article.

KAY: It wasn't an article. It was an advertisement.

HEDY: Undeserved, just the same.

KAY: Thank you.

HEDY: Thank you. For the olive.

KAY: Good luck with your invention!

(Hedy evaporates. Kay slinks back, then straightens.)

(“Some of These Days” by Alice Babs & Nisse Lind plays in the background.)

KAY: Do I know? Have I just not realized?

(Kay goes to the phone dials. Listens.)

(The music rises in volume. Talking over the music)

KAY: Hello...

(Kays smiles sadly, wryly. The expression of someone hearing the voice of an old lover.)

Can I come over?

(The room shifts. “Rose in December” by Alice Faye plays.)

(Kay spins through the curtains. She arrives at Marlene Dietrich’s Spanish style home in Westwood. A place she has been before, where once she was comfortable but is now cautious.)

KAY: Lene?

(Marlene appears, draped in curtains. Der blaue Engel.)

MARLENE: Kay Francis. While I live and breath.

KAY: Thanks for having me.

MARLENE: It's no trouble. Dougie's out of town.

KAY: I assumed.

MARLENE: Have a drink with me, won't you. I want to wash this taste out of
mouth. I've just finished up dinner with some Nazis.

(Marlene pours Kay some gin.)

KAY: Nazis? What on God's green earth are you doing dining with Nazis.

(They recline. Imagine a chaise.)

MARLENE: They want me.

KAY: Want you for what?

MARLENE: Films. Photo ops. “Deutschland, erwache” and all that. I’m the biggest star in the world. And I’m German. Why wouldn’t they want me?

KAY: Lene, you’re not-

MARLENE: No. I hate the bastards. But my American citizenship hasn’t come through. I could be sent back. And my mother is still there. So I’ve been eating a lot of schnitzel.

KAY: Oh. I didn’t realize.

MARLENE: Enough. To what do I owe this pleasure? You’re glum.

KAY: You’ve seen it, haven’t you.

MARLENE: My publicist sent it over.

KAY: And?

MARLENE: And what? I’ve got Nazis coming over to dinner. I’m lucky they even let me work.

KAY: There’s something else.

Bette Davis has been telling people that Erik is a Nazi.

MARLENE: Well. Is he?

KAY: I don't know.

MARLENE: Then I think you do know.

KAY: You're just saying that because you've never liked him.

MARLENE: The same way you never liked Dougie?

KAY: I wouldn't say that Dougie is a Nazi.

MARLENE: That's because Dougie's not a Nazi. Erik, well, that's a different story.

KAY: Lene!

MARLENE: I know his type, Kay. You forget I was there. Berlin was my home. And I saw them, men like Erik. Men who thought their country was leaving them behind.

Bauhaus and Brecht. Heidegger and Hirschfeld. The Novembergruppe.

Homosexuals and Jews. And women, of course. We were all there to take them down.

I thought it was the beginning of a new way of life. But these men, these angry bitter men just couldn't grapple with their own mediocrity even though they'd had centuries to prove themselves.

Men like Erik can't cope with their own insecurity. He will be swept up in the lies they tell him, if hasn't been swept up already.

(A breath.)

KAY: What do I do? My career is tanked. The studio is going to drop me in September because I wouldn't blow Jack Warner. What will the papers say? First I'm a "known lesbian", now I'm a Nazi fucker?

MARLENE: You do seem to have a thing for Germans, don't you.

KAY: Marlene!

MARLENE: Don't wait. To get out. Leave while you still can. Before it spreads.

(A breath.)

KAY: I miss you.

MARLENE: No, Kay. None of that. We're movie stars. We don't get to be ourselves.

(A breath.)

MARLENE: Chin up, Kay. You just need a new project.

KAY: So far, all I've got is knitting.

MARLENE: I've got something in the works. I could use the help of a clever girl.

KAY: What?

MARLENE: I'm going to kill Hitler.

KAY: WHAT.

MARLENE: I'm planning a trip to Europe. To negotiate a contract with the Nazis so I can make their little films. But only if I can have a private audience with the fuhrer himself. Once alone, I'll seduce old Adolf. And then I'll kill him.

KAY: How?

MARLENE: That's where I need your help. I don't know if I could conceal a weapon.
 And if all goes according to plan, I won't have any clothes on. But your
 crafty. Maybe you have an idea.

KAY: A poison hairpin?

MARLENE: That could work.

(A breath.)

KAY: You're not serious, are you.

(Marlene smiles.)

MARLENE: You Americans just don't want to admit how serious this all is.

*(Transition. "You Go to My Head" by Marlene Dietrich plays. Kay spins back into her
dressing room. It is late or early. She picks up the phone.)*

KAY: Hello. I'd like to place a person to person call to Baron Raven Erik
 Barnekow, Alt-Marin, Pomeria at numbers 14R2.

I'll wait.

(She waits.)

(The music swells. Lights fade to blackout.)

CURTAIN.

("My Future Just Passed" by The Boswell Sisters plays.

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